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ON PAGE B 15

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Afghan Invasion: A Kremlin Mystery

There are whispers in Moscow that the Afghanistan invasion was forced upon the aging and ailing Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, who was simply too weak to resist.

This would be a foreboding development for the world; it could mean that the Kremlin has fallen under the control of hardheads who are willing to use raw military power to expand the Soviet empire.

Their most likely objective would be the Persian Gulf—the oil heartland that pumps the industrial lifeblood to the western world. This could lead to the most dangerous confrontation in history, with bristling nuclear weaponry on both sides.

It is difficult to discern what goes on in the murky depths of the Kremlin. The leaders who inhabit it are dark, bulky forms who enter and leave in black, curtained limousines. Their deliberations are unwatched and unchecked by the 263 million people they govern.

Our intelligence agencies, nevertheless, have succeded in catching fleeting glimpses inside the Kremlin. On occasion, they have even intercepted the private conversations of Soviet leaders.

From top-secret intelligence reports and from the analyses of top U.S. Kremlinologists, I have pieced together an account of what has been going on behind those forbidding Kremlin walls.

There is general agreement that Brezhnev—against the opposition of the hardheads—had staked his leadership in detente. The showdown came in 1972 when Brezhnev invited then-President Richard Nixon to Moscow for a summit meeting.

Kremlin leaders try to hide their disputes behind an opaque front, but Brezhnev later confided to the party faithful that Nixon's visit had been opposed. Relates a top-secret report: "In discussing the Central Committee meeting of May 1972, which approved President Nixon's visit despite the course of the war in Vietnam, Brezhnev hinted that there was opposition at this 'turning point' . . ."

The opposition flared up again after Nixon mined Haiphong harbor, trapping 12 Soviet cargo ships inside a ring of explosive charges. The hardheads angrily demanded that the summit meeting be canceled.

But Brezhnev is described in the intelligence anaylses as "a consensus politician" who has been able to balance the rival factions against one another. He succeeded in quieting the uproar.

In the final poll of the Politburo, only the Ukrainian party leader, Pyotr Shelest, would not be appeased. He growled that Nixon would not be welcome in the Ukraine. "I will not shake the hand that has been bloodied in Vietnam," he reortedly declared.

Brezhnev turned to Vladimir Shcherbitsky, another Ukrainian, who ranked below Shelest in the Politburo. "Do you agree with Comrade Pyotr?" Brezhnev asked quietly.

"I do not," Shcherbitsky quickly responded. "President Nixon will be welcome in the Ukraine."

Brezhnev shifted his attention back to Shelest. "You see, comrade," the Kremlin czar said evenly, "you can speak for yourself, but you cannot speak for all Ukrainians."

Immediately thereafter, Shelest was dropped from the Politburo and replaced as Ukrainian party chief by the more pliable Shcherbitsky. But the dissatisfaction with detente continued to bubble beneath the surface. This was acknowledged to Americans in East Germany by Soviet Ambassador Pyotr Abrasimov in late 1975. He told the Americans about a party meeting he had attended in Moscow.

According to a classified account of Abrasimov's remarks, "Brezhnev reaffirmed detente with the West although," Abrasimov said, "there are others who would not seem to favor detente."

Other intellegence reports identify the Kremlin's ideological high priest, Mikhail Suslov, as the spiritual leader of the dissidents. But Brezhnev, ever cautious and conciliatory, sought to balance the opposing factions.

A Feb. 26, 1976 report, classified "Top Secret Umbra," cited Brezhnev's private argument that "detente has not prevented the Soviet Union from carrying out its international obligations" and that it had not produced any "slackening of the ideological struggle or of internal discipline."

Brezhnev's prestige has become so closely tied to detente that some analysts think the Afghanistan invasion was a plot to discredit him. According to this theory, the restless, younger members of the Politburo joined the hardheads to outvote Brezhnev.

But the experienced analysts at the Central Intelligence Agency don't believe it. They are convinced that Brezhnev is still the top man on the Soviet totem pole.